

Thieves of State: Why corruption threatens global security

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thieves of State: Why corruption threatens global security, by Sarah Chayes, New York, W. W. Norton, 2015, 262 pp., US\$13.28 (paperback), ISBN 978-0393-23946-1 (hardcover)

Corruption is a global phenomenon that is multi-layered and stubbornly resilient. As researchers we compartmentalise our study of corruption into dimensions that focus either on the drivers of corrupt activity within the intricate web of relationships forged between political, bureaucratic and private actors, or the design and efficacy of ‘anti-corruption’ measures intended to combat and control malfeasance. Although this distinction helps to give normative impetus to the need to stem the considerable damage wrought by corruption on the legitimacy and policy outcomes pursued by states, it risks minimising the entrenched institutionalised risk that corruption has always posed in the functioning of state institutions. In this regard, corruption is less a pathological defect in how institutions operate – something that can simply be ‘combated’ by a range of ‘anti-corruption’ enforcement measures – and more an inherent risk in the functioning of these institutions, albeit a more acute risk depending on prevailing circumstances.

In *Thieves of state: Why corruption threatens global security*, veteran foreign correspondent and historian Sarah Chayes offers a particularly compelling portrayal of the dysfunctional but seemingly symbiotic relationship between institutionalised corruption (kleptocratic) and radical insurgencies, which both sustains and constantly threatens the legitimacy and security of states ranging from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, and including Tunisia, Egypt and Nigeria in between. Chayes’s account is anchored in her experience in Afghanistan, after 2001, in which she combines a candid and incisive on-the-ground observation with historical symbolism to show how corruption can thrive in the fluid circumstances of state reconstruction, but that it can also undermine the consolidation of the very authority the state purportedly seeks to reassert.

Although this scenario is not in itself unusual or undocumented, if one considers for example Peter Evans’s¹ portrayal of Zaire as an archetypal ‘predatory state’ in the 1960s, what is noteworthy about the contemporary Afghan case is how corruption functions as an almost intrinsic component of an aid-dependent state rebuilding, perpetuated by new and unscrupulous self-appointed political and bureaucratic change agents who misappropriate the considerable proceeds of mainly American military and civilian aid bureaucracies. This, the author argues, places the latter at risk of ‘captur[e] by corrupt intermediaries, whose abuse was driving Afghans into the arms of ... extremist insurgents’ (i.e. the Taliban) (p. 29). This appears to be the central theme of Chayes’s work, that corruption can thrive in circumstances of disorder as well as renewal by cultivating a ‘better the devil you know’ attitude amongst foreign military and civilian aid agencies who elect to look the other way in the face of state-sponsored venality to ‘get things done’, which ultimately, however, sustains the appeal of extremists by sowing resentment amongst the citizenry.

Again, the response to Chayes by a US official in Afghanistan that ‘we work with governments. And lots of them aren’t savory’ (p. 33) may not be novel if one considers Brian Loveman’s² (1976) critique of US assistance to promote ‘development administration’ in non-democratic regimes, but the texture of Chayes’s prose about Afghanistan lends new impetus to a seemingly intractable conundrum.

Chayes’s contribution is written in a candid, semi-autobiographical style, which conveys the author’s personal and professional journey as a journalist and adjunct member of the US and coalition military and civilian aid effort in Afghanistan. Her observations about how corruption manifests itself are interesting, although at some points laboured, interspersed with extracts from historical texts on political stewardship and princely counsel from as early as the medieval period. The book’s detour from Afghanistan to other countries and then back again appears abrupt, although brought on by the author’s realisation that ‘the link between kleptocracy and violent religious extremism wasn’t just an Afghanistan thing. It was a global phenomenon’ (p. 66).

Chayes then turns her attention to deconstructing how the authority of kleptocratic regimes has elsewhere been challenged, in some cases successfully, by generalised citizen opposition (the ‘Arab Spring’ events of Tunisia and Egypt) or how it was spawning extremist opposition (Uzbekistan and Nigeria). Although this digression does not equip the book with a sufficient comparative foundation to examine the link between state-sponsored corruption and extremism, which remains anchored in the Afghan story, it does offer an entry point into such a future venture. For example, the following statement attributed to the Uzbek story could potentially be generalised across the cases: ‘Entrenched kleptocracies may find it simpler to face off against violent extremists, who terrify their populations and the international community alike, and who can be killed as enemies, than to confront political or economic movements calling for deep-seated government reform’ (p. 117).

The book’s final section returns to the theme of how kleptocratic practices are sustained in Afghanistan by conflicting US inter-agency interests, again returns to the historical echoes of wisdom and misdeeds that resonate with the book’s contemporary cases, and then turns to ‘remedies’. The question is whether there can be realistic remedies to the kleptocratic conundrum that Chayes so vividly portrays. The tools she outlines are crafted from the standpoint of the bilateral and multilateral actions that aid-providing countries can take to ‘raise the cost of kleptocratic practices’ (p. 188). These tools include: more robust anticorruption policies; better inter-agency co-ordination; Western diplomats bypassing official channels to engage directly with populations; stricter monitoring of aid transfers; and more ethical and circumspect business investment. The application and efficacy of these tools in the context of the book’s rich case descriptions gives broad appeal to Chayes’s work, including policy makers, non-governmental advocates, academics and members of the public with an interest in current affairs. Ultimately, the message that she leaves us with is that the security dividends sought by Western governments continuing their calculated engagement with kleptocratic regimes is based on increasingly tenuous and potentially counter-productive investment.

Notes

1. Evans P, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

2. Loveman B, 'The comparative administration group, development administration and anti-development', *Public Administration Review* 36.6, 1976, pp. 616–621.

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Worldmaking: The art and science of American diplomacy, by David Milne, New York, Macmillan, 2015, 624 pp., US\$30, ISBN 978-0-374-29256-0.

Analyses of the US foreign policy often seek to explain decision-making by turning to ideological dichotomies. Historically, these included internationalists pitted against isolationists, and multilateralists against unilateralists. These dichotomies of thought paint policy-makers – inside government and out – as driven by conceptual frameworks that guide attitudes towards crisis and opportunity, providing a useful framing in which decisions are consistent with ideological orientation. While the complexities of each decision are multi-faceted, these dynamics prove useful to explain differences in thought amongst practitioners.

Among the most persistent of these dichotomies is that of the realist vs the idealist, between those who view foreign policy purely as a means to maximise narrow state interests and those who see foreign policy as a realm to promote an agenda rooted in core principles.

In *Worldmaking*, David Milne sets out to redefine the prism through which scholars of American foreign policy understand US actions. Milne accepts that understanding American foreign policy requires an ideational frame. Rather than reverting to the tired and simplistic binaries, he establishes a new and provocative thesis. Milne proposes that the most effective background theme through which to understand American diplomatic history is the struggle between artist and scientist, a theory perhaps borne of his interpretation of George Kennan's observation that 'wise diplomatic strategy required the touch of the gardener, not a mechanic' (p. 299). In Milne's view, the artist of American thinking are individuals who seek to respond creatively and intuitively to a world without pattern (p. 515), while the scientists unveils and utilises systemic approaches to effect enduring change. Milne suggests that, rather than categorising influential American thinkers by ideology, it is more useful to identify individuals rigid in adherence to an ideological framework, and those more fluid in their thinking.

To make his case, Milne applies a unique approach to the study of American history, presenting nine character studies of influential thinkers over the last century and a half. Starting with Alfred Mahan and concluding with Barack Obama, Milne seamlessly integrates intellectual biographies of these nine individuals while detailing the circumstances surrounding the policy challenges with which they wrestled. Each of the essays could admirably stand alone; together they present a compelling study of intellectual trends and themes that continue to dominate American diplomatic thinking.

Milne begins with careful studies of Alfred Mahan and Woodrow Wilson, individuals with unique and continued influence. Milne suggests that the intellectual